Families who flee

The number of refugees in the world more than doubled in the decade since 1981—from 8 million to over 18 million in 1992. The great majority of those who flee war or persecution across national borders do so as family units, and 80 per cent are women and children.

"The decision to become a refugee is usually a family decision", says Susan Forbes Martin, co-founder of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. "Family patterns, and particularly extended family patterns, determine who becomes a refugee and where they go."

Thus, intact families may flee an emergency, or older males may send women and children away from a threatening situation while they remain behind to guard land or property or fight a civil war. Those who leave generally seek refuge where relatives or kinsfolk live. Strategies change over time—various family members may return to their homes or join their relatives in flight, depending on the level of danger and opportunities for subsistence.

Initial damage to refugee families

The process of seeking refuge and the conditions which force this action bring death to many and trauma to the survivors.

Maria Ana de Jesús Rodríguez testified at a public hearing last year that families from her village in Central America fled in 1980 after tortures and murders were inflicted on them by military forces; that four in the group were killed crossing into a neighbouring country; and that, while seeking to return to their homeland the next year, 36 more died under air attack in the same area.

Canon Burgess Carr, director of the Episcopal Migration Ministries and formerly Secretary-General of the All-Africa Council of Churches, remembers stories from the 1970s told him by Burundi mothers. Their families were pursued by soldiers "from burning villages into the tall grass, where, to prevent the discovery of the entire group, they had to silence crying infants for ever by crushing their babies' skulls between their knees".

Natural forces also decimate families on the run: storms that swamp dilapidated craft on the open seas, droughts, floods and mud-slides. Filsan Darman, who provided social education for women and children for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Somalia and is now running a relief programme for displaced Somalis, spoke to a mother who saw two of her children killed by lions during their flight from civil war.

Sometimes family units are destroyed completely. Boys from southern Sudan, for instance, are in fear of attack by one side in the civil war or conscription by the other. For years they have been fleeing into Kenya and Ethiopia *en masse*, and by 1988 four out of five of the 180,000 inhabitants of the Itang camp in Ethiopia were unaccompanied males. The fathers of many of them had been killed, and sisters and mothers had been raped and abducted.

World-wide patterns

Refugees are not concentrated in any one part of the globe. They come in great numbers from Indo-China, central Asia, the Horn of Africa, southern Africa, the eastern Mediterranean coast, the Caribbean and Central America—regions where bitter conflicts have been exacerbated by underdevelopment, environmental degradation, ethnic or religious tensions, harsh repression or natural disasters. In only one week in 1991, 1.5 million people flooded the border areas of Iraq, Turkey and Iran, and in 1993 fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina and adjacent lands is setting off a mass exodus within Europe.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was created in 1951, in the aftermath of the Second World War, to provide international protection to refugees and to seek durable solutions to their problems. It is estimated that World War II cre-

ated some 17 million refugees—almost as many as there are today. However, the resettlement of refugees has proved more difficult in recent years than during the immediate post-war period, while voluntary repatriation, despite increased opportunities stemming from the end of the cold war, is fraught with innumerable and complex problems.

For example, while hundreds of thousands of refugees are returning to Afghanistan, more than 5 million continue an exile that for many has gone on for 13 years. Tribal conflicts, land-mines and long stretches of parched land stand between families and their home villages.

For more than 2 million Palestinians registered as refugees with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the wait has gone on even longer. The first wave of refugees was created in 1948, and it is common to find Palestinian children who are the fourth generation of their families to live in the same refugee camp.

Impact on families

Refugee families must cope with the trauma of separation from their native land and from friends and relatives. The effects have been noted in places such as the Site 2 camp in Thailand, which has been home for more than 100,000 Cambodians who fled their country in the 1970s and 1980s. Observers have noted the orderly appearance of row upon row of thatched huts extending as far as the eye can see—and, at second glance, a deep-seated malaise. Especially prior to recent repatriation under United Nations auspices, residents were afflicted by depression, suicide, drug abuse, alcoholism, crime and sheer boredom. "There were almost no medical problems", recalls François Luigi, who worked with displaced Cambodians and is now in charge of recruitment for Médecins sans frontières (Doctors Without Borders), "but there were tremendous psychological problems."

To a greater or lesser extent, families must depend on the charity of others. Approximately one half of the world's refugees receive international aid from UNHCR and a host of non-governmental organizations, and roughly half of them live in camps. Those not receiving international assistance usually require help from friends, relatives, communities or Governments. Even individuals with professional skills may have a hard time finding work.

For the majority of refugee families that are headed by women, the difficulties are compounded. Mothers who need to attend to their children are scarcely able to seek employment. Women are vulnerable to rape, harassment and robbery. In societies where clan identity is determined through the male line, families headed by women may lose their affiliation and, since so much relief assistance is channelled through clans, become cut off from aid.

Family structures undergo change, as traditional roles take strange twists. Wives continue to prepare food, gather wood and care for children, but as de facto heads of households. Husbands, when they are present, cannot fulfil their role as providers. This can lead to family tension, domestic violence or abandonment. "The women have a lot to do, but the men feel helpless looking at their wife and children, and not being able to help them", Somali relief worker Filsan Darman says. "They just run away."

UNHCR has developed training programmes to assist refugee workers in recognizing these socio-economic changes in the community in order that programmes can be developed to support the families' adjustment.

Children tend to be more adaptable to new settings than their elders, and to learn foreign languages faster. They often serve as a conduit for information between their family and the outside world, in the process taking on some of the attributes of parents. Role inversions like this can result in intergenerational conflicts.

In many refugee situations, children have witnessed atrocities or committed atrocities themselves. Tizita Belachew, a Somali who observed refugees and displaced people in Ethiopia for the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, saw the effect of nearly continuous war and famine: "The typical 17-year-old you talk to has witnessed 17 years of brutality. They are survivors, but most of them don't have a plan for life. The traditional respect of children for their elders is breaking down. Most of the kids go to school with guns."

The strengths of refugee families

Despite the battering that families take when they become refugees, the family remains an irreplaceable source of strength. Relatives help with child care and fill the gaps caused by the absence of other family members. The shared purpose of family

life provides a fixed point of reference within an uprooted existence.

Extended family relations are especially important. In Africa, for instance, refugees crossing borders drawn up in artificial fashion by colonial authorities often arrive in communities of their own tribe or clan. "Most of them speak the same language, and in past times frequented the same markets", says Nana Apeadu, a Queen Mother from a Ghanaian village who is active in refugee relief. "So they're welcomed as relatives in the African style. Governments help, chiefs help, the communities help."

Refugees have demonstrated great resilience and compassion in repairing broken families. In many settings, refugee orphans are adopted by refugee families. New family units are improvised. Nana Apeadu is familiar with a 28-year-old refugee woman from Liberia who takes care of nine individuals, including uncles, cousins and children of relatives who have been slain.

When taking decisions about returning to homelands, extended family contacts are crucial. "Family communication networks", as Susan Forbes Martin of the Women's Commission calls them, are the most relied-upon source of information about security on the other side of a border.

Refugee families in Africa and West Asia

A good deal of international attention to the plight of refugees has been focused on the regions of sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia. Following are short summaries of the conditions of families leaving countries that have experienced drastic upheaval.

A brutal struggle in the countryside of **Mozambique**, where insurgent forces are known to have had the backing of the Government of South Africa, brought murderous attacks on villages augmented by rapes or severe beatings of women. Throughout the 1980s, tribally related kinsfolk in Malawi, itself an impoverished country, responded generously to the needs of Mozambican refugees. Farmland and communal support were quickly provided until the number of refugees—currently estimated at 1 million—swelled to unmanageable proportions. A recently negotiated truce and a United Nations peace-keeping plan are raising hopes that refugees can begin to return.

A civil war launched at the end of 1989 in **Liberia** ignited brutal tribal conflicts. It is estimated that nearly half of Liberia's population of 2.5 million has been displaced by the war, making for the largest percentage of refugees and internally displaced people of any nation. Relief agencies and neighbouring countries have rallied in support of families who fled across the borders. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), for instance, support a general store in western Ghana where refugee women who are heads of households can earn money and other refugees can gather and socialize. In the south of Côte d'Ivoire, UNHCR provides seeds and tools and the Government allows families to resettle within its borders.

Civil wars, tribal and religious conflicts, drought and famine have stalked **Ethiopia**, **Sudan** and **Somalia** during the past decade. Refugees have moved in large numbers between these three countries according to the ebb and flow of war and persecution, and into nearby Kenya as well. Sudanese refugees are remarkable for the high percentage of unaccompanied young males, and families fleeing Somalia and Ethiopia have suffered tremendous dislocations. Large numbers of men have been killed or been separated from their families as they engage in armed conflict or migrate to other countries, notably those in the Persian Gulf, to seek work. UNHCR has recently put more emphasis on counselling for women, training its staff to deal with the effects of family losses. Sadly, clan conflicts that have intensified disorder in Somalia have carried over to refugee camps and made food distribution more complicated.

For **Palestinians**, as for the Arab culture in general, the family is at the centre of life. Even though many males are absent because of death, imprisonment or a search for work, the family continues to be a bulwark. Significantly, refugees are registered with UNRWA as family members. In camps located in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, additions to living quarters are constructed to allow common housing for extended families. UNRWA provides a wide range of services to bolster the family, including women's cooperatives, schools, day-care facilities and family clinics.

By all accounts, family structures were a key survival factor for Kurds fleeing **Iraq** in 1991, and for those who have returned in the face of great hardship and danger since then. Extended kinship ties proved to be most beneficial for those who crossed into western Iran, where a significant Kurdish population resides.

The camps in this area have been closed down, and refugees who did not return to Iraq have been assimilated into the local culture and economy.

Relief assistance and development

Support for refugee families that goes beyond the basic survival needs of food, clothing, shelter and medical care gives refugees a better chance to become self-reliant and productive. Such support in fact is a form of development assistance. There is a great need, therefore, to link development and relief assistance.

One way to do this is to tie infrastructure used at the outset of an emergency to development activities—for instance, providing seeds for farming. As soon as possible other kinds of assistance, such as offering credit to small businesses and cooperatives and setting up family clinics, schools and day-care facilities, should be made available. To reduce the antagonism between refugees and local people who also are in great need, it may be advantageous to share development aid among the two groups.

The process is not easy. The Governments of many countries are reluctant to encourage development plans which may induce refugees to stay within their borders indefinitely. Many development agencies are not experienced in working with households headed by women, or fail to take into account the significance of extended family structures.

The dynamics of refugee aid can under certain circumstances actually perpetuate dependency. Families unconvinced of the reliability of development assistance in their native land or their new place of residence may opt to remain refugees, and therefore eligible at least for emergency aid. And Governments of severely underdeveloped countries can find economic reasons to prefer that refugees remain abroad; by sending back part of what they receive in assistance or earn as workers to relatives who stayed behind, the refugees temporarily improve their country's balance of payments and ease its welfare burden.

Most urgently, the world community is called upon to help settle the disputes which cause displacement. A letter sent to Nana Apeadu by a woman who fled Liberia contains this message: "Every day I pray for peace, so that finally no one will need to know what the word 'refugee' means."

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The changing family structure

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.
Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

The family is a universal phenomenon, and the concept of the family is perhaps the most basic one in social life.

But families manifest themselves in widely different forms and functions. Perceptions of the role of the family vary among societies and cultures. There is no single view of the family, nor can there be a universally applicable definition. Indeed, one of the major attributes of the family is its diversity.

Instead of speaking of the family in the singular, it is often more appropriate to speak of "families", since the forms have varied within regions and through history, in accordance with changes in social, political and economic circumstances.

Historically, in most cultures the family has been patriarchal, or male-dominated. One example of the male-dominated family is the description of the family given in the Old Testament, where the male heads of the clan were allowed to have several wives as well as concubines. As a general rule, the women of the Old Testament had a rather low status.

In ancient Rome, the family was also patriarchal, but polygamy was not practised and women enjoyed a better status, although they still were not allowed to manage their own affairs. The Roman family was an extended one, and the patriarch had the authority even to kill his sons.

In medieval Europe, the family was influenced by the practices of the Roman Catholic Church and feudalism; it was generally extended and male-dominated. In contrast, Muslim women of the same period had considerable control over their own personal property.

The industrial revolution spawned great changes in family structure. Industrialization and urbanization led to the breakup of the large feudal estates and prompted a sharp change in life and working styles. Many people, especially unmarried youths, left the farms and went to the cities to work in the factories. This process led to the dissolution of many extended families.

At the same time, patriarchal rule slowly gave way to a greater equality between the sexes. Stereotyping of male and female roles within the family broke down. No longer was caring for the home and children the exclusive duty of women, nor earning a living and pursuing a public life the exclusive domain of men. Many wives started working outside the home, just as many husbands started sharing the duties involved in maintaining a household.

The changing family

This transformation of the structure of the family continues today, as families are undergoing rapid changes all over the world. Although such changes differ from region to region, there are some common traits: smaller nuclear families, the greater longevity of family members, and the transformation of relationships within the family due to changing values.

Other changes are under way. Formalized marriage is losing its status, and divorce has increased in almost all countries where it is attainable. It is estimated that one third of all families are now single-parent families headed by a woman.

Traditional definitions of family structure tended to be based on two major types—the nuclear and the extended family. But these are undergoing changes, while new family types are emerging.

In many countries the extended family is being replaced by the nuclear family, as societies become more and more industrialized and urbanized. And the nuclear family itself is changing, with the advances of equality between the sexes, new technologies facilitating child-bearing, and economic changes which provide women with independent sources of sustenance.

At the same time, non-traditional family types are becoming more and more common, such as cohabitation, same-gender relationships, single-parent families and reorganized families.

Nuclear families and cohabitation

Modern Western families tend to create the nuclear family, where two generations—parents and children—live together. Even if the children move out, the "empty nest" is still considered a nuclear family. Statistics show that the nuclear family is more common in countries where people's life expectancy is high.

Nuclear families are well suited for urbanized societies, since they can easily move and do not need large dwellings. While the nuclear family offers several advantages, the limited number of family members makes it vulnerable to internal and external pressures.

Cohabitation emerged in the 1970s from a more general change in social values—new attitudes not only towards marriage, but towards divorce, children born outside marriage and abortion. In Europe, for example, cohabitation without marriage has increased—at least before children are born.

Surveys suggest that cohabitation is chosen for a variety of reasons. Among the single, trial marriage or opposition to marriage is mentioned, as is refusal to make a long-term commitment. Among those previously married, cohabitation also occurs when a waiting period is needed to remarry, or when one of the partners does not wish a new legal commitment after a previous unhappy marriage.

Young adults up to age 25 represent the population group with the largest percentage of cohabiting women. The highest prevalence is found in Scandinavia: by the 1980s, 28 per cent of the women in the age group 20-24 in Norway, 37 per cent in Denmark and 44 per cent in Sweden were cohabiting. But in all countries for which data are available, substantial increases have also taken place among the older age groups.

Cohabitation can be a prelude to marriage. For instance, close to half of the couples marrying in the 1980s in the United States had previously lived together.

As more couples are cohabiting, births outside marriage are increasing. They represented 16 per cent of all births in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1988, 26 per cent in France in 1988, 27 per cent in the United Kingdom in 1989 and 47 per cent in Sweden in 1990.

Single-parent and polygamous families

Single-parent families are formed through the death of one spouse, divorce, separation, desertion or the decision by the partners not to live together. Such families differ greatly in their economic conditions, but often have more limited resources than two-parent families.

Single-parent families are mostly headed by a woman—indeed, one of every three households in the world has a woman as its sole breadwinner. But the number of male-headed single-parent families seems to be rising in the Western world. These have, in general, a better economic position than female-headed units. Female-headed families tend to be economically vulnerable, as the female wage-earner tends to receive lower pay.

Single-parent families need the support of the public authorities. Yet in most countries legal systems and policies lag behind societal changes, leading to a failure to support the needs of non-traditional families. The increase in single-parent families all over the world poses major challenges for policy makers.

In many societies, marriages are polygamous, providing for the marriage of a man to several women or, less commonly, the marriage of a woman to several men. Polygamy is, for instance, culturally accepted in much of Africa, where anyone can accede to it, if one has the economic means. In North Africa, about 7 per cent of all marriages are polygamous, and in central Africa the figure varies between 10 and 25 per cent. In West Africa polygamy involves about 30 per cent of women.

In some polygamous families, some or all of the wives (and sometimes the husbands) may not live with their spouse. Nor is the residence of the family necessarily the residence of the children. Sometimes there are several allied family units under the same head.

Extended families and kinship and tribal families

In many parts of the world, the family is the combination of several family "molecules", which together form an extended family. An extended family need not

be big: it is, for instance, small in the case of a grandparent and a grandchild living together. But usually the extended family refers to numerous people either living together or having frequent, intimate interaction.

A common form of extended family is the three-generation family, where grandparents, parents and children live together. Cultures that value respect and care for the elderly see the three-generation family as the most desirable form of the family.

Such a family often exists where the division of land and other property would diminish the economic possibilities of all family members. Thus, the three-generation form is more prevalent in rural areas.

The growing shortage of housing in cities has created a sort of forced extended family, as many young couples have no choice but to live with their parents. In such cases, the tendency is to view a household as containing two nuclear families, which break up when separate dwellings become possible.

Extended families used to be prevalent in the countryside, and nuclear families in the cities. But a reversal seems to be taking place in many parts of the world. The countryside is becoming increasingly nuclear, as the productive limits of subdivided land reduce the capacity of large families to support themselves. And cities increasingly consist of extended family units, drawn together as a survival strategy in the face of deteriorating economies and lack of individual opportunity.

Kinship families consist of even larger units. In addition to three generations, other relatives (such as uncles, aunts and cousins) may belong to the same household.

In some Western countries, instead of marrying, people may choose to live in a mutual-support community, where several nuclear families and single persons live together. There are also households of couples or small groups of women who care for the children of one or more of them.

On an even broader scale, tribal families are usually built on a social rather than a biological basis. Responsibility for the care of children may be taken up by several people. The biological mother's sisters may be called mothers, and the father's brothers may be responsible for serving as father to the children. All cousins are often called sisters and brothers. This type of family rarely neglects children, because there is an abundance of parents.

Reorganized families and migrant families

In all forms of families, reorganizations can occur through the marriage, remarriage or cohabitation of persons who had children by former partners.

There are several forms of remarriage or cohabitation under common law. One spouse or both spouses may have children who may or may not live with them. The spouses may or may not have children together. In this way, children can have several half-sisters and half-brothers, "half-grandparents" and other non-biological relatives.

Owing to the prevailing rates of marriage, remarriage and cohabitation, the reorganized family is for some observers the most important new family group in many societies.

The 1980s have seen the resurgence of international migration. Among the traditional countries of immigration, the United States admitted more than 3 million permanent immigrants between 1985 and 1989. In Europe, the 12 member States of the European Community were estimated to be hosting over 13 million foreigners, nearly 60 per cent of whom originated outside the Community. Millions of foreigners, mainly from southern and south-eastern Asia, were working in the oil-producing States of the Persian Gulf.

On the whole, as many as 70 million people are working (legally or illegally) in countries other than their own. In addition, thousands of families have been forced out of their countries by wars or persecution. As a result, migrant families are more and more common. Such families have to shoulder the burden of cultural change, difficult processes of adjustment, and rapidly transformed interpersonal relations within the family.

But the migrant family is also a powerful example of the family as a source of identity; as a place of intimacy and emotional nourishment; and as a provider of support in times of crisis. The migrant family is a testimony to the importance of the family in today's world.

Vital and resilient

These profound changes in family structure may be seen as a sign of decline; but despite the many pressures and challenges it has faced, the institution of the family has shown remarkable vitality and resilience. Rather than indicating an erosion of the worth of the family, new forms of family life are developing to meet

the challenges of the modern world, and are struggling to find more effective ways of balancing individual rights and social responsibilities.

The variety in family structure has often been stressed by the United Nations. For instance, in its 1991 resolution on the International Year of the Family, the United Nations General Assembly recognized "the existence of various concepts of the family in different socio-political and cultural systems".

Indeed, promoting an accurate understanding of families among Governments, policy makers and the public is one of the objectives of the International Year of the Family.

Forms of families

Nuclear	Extended	Reorganized
Biological	Three-generation	Remarried
Social	Kinship	Community living
One-parent	Tribal	Same-gender [a]
Adoptive [b]	Polygamous [a]	
In vitro [a]		

[a] Legal status in only a limited number of countries.
[b] In countries where legal adoption is recognized.

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